

Cluster: Youth and education, social inequality

Project 12: Social networks and educational inequality in the transition from primary to secondary education

Aim

To understand how the socio-economic or ethnic composition of the social network affect (social inequality in) educational decisions, aspirations, and performance.

Theoretical Background

Socio-economic and ethnic inequalities in children's academic achievement and orientation are well-documented. However, empirical research on specific mechanisms explaining why these inequalities exist remains limited. With a strong focus on parent-child and teacher-student relationships, academic research has not paid much attention to the importance of social networks for educational outcomes. While relational aspects are incorporated in sociological theories on inequality in educational attainment, a true network perspective is lacking.

The main aim of this project is to understand how the socio-economic or ethnic composition of the social network affects inequality in educational decisions, aspirations, and performance. For this project we will gather new and unique data that will allow the PhD student to incorporate (1) important properties of students' network structure (e.g., centrality and network density) and (2) different types of relationships (e.g., friendship ties as well as ties among the parents of friends) as predictors of educational decisions, aspirations, and performance in students' transition from primary to secondary education. How is the choice of a secondary school affected by the choices made by a student's friends? Do social networks affect the educational aspirations of students? And to what extent do these effects work differently for students with different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds? Can peer processes help us to understand why children from disadvantaged backgrounds receive lower track recommendations than equally performing children from high social backgrounds?

The transition from primary school to the tracked secondary school is arguably the most important transition for understanding social inequalities in educational careers in the Dutch context. By focusing on this transition we target the spot where social networks are expected to have the strongest influence. Given the rising inequalities by socioeconomic background reported by the Inspectorate of Education in the Netherlands, it is of crucial importance from both a scientific and a policy perspective to understand how inequalities emerge at this educational stage.

Research design

This project is part of the larger *National Cohort Study Educational Careers* (NCO, Nationaal Cohortonderzoek Onderwijs) on peer relations in the transition from primary to secondary school, a collaboration between the University of Amsterdam, the University of Groningen, NCO and CBS (Statistics Netherlands). A second PhD student will be hired in Groningen, who will mainly focus on students' social integration in the peer context. The PhD student in Amsterdam will primarily focus on the role of peer processes in educational inequality by building on expertise from the fields of sociology, economics, and educational sciences.

Longitudinal data will be collected over two adjacent school years (Grade 6 and 7). These data will be merged with existing register data on school careers and family background from the NCO. To examine the research questions both complete and ego-centered network data will be collected, together with information on educational choices and aspirations. These data will be linked to academic achievement and performance from the registers.

Literature

Andrew, Megan, and Jennifer Flashman. School Transitions, Peer Influence, and Educational Expectation Formation: Girls and Boys. *Social Science Research* 61 (2017): 218–233.

DiMaggio, Paul, and Filiz Garip. "Network Effects and Social Inequality." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 93–118.

Lucas, Samuel R. "Effectively Maintained Inequality: Education Transitions, Track Mobility, and Social Background Effects." *American Journal of Sociology* 106, no. 6 (2001): 1642–1690.

Project initiators

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Location

Amsterdam (UvA)